

June 1993

Interview / Richard Rowe

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Against the Grain

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Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina (1993) "Interview / Richard Rowe," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 15.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1346>

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People

An Interview With **Richard Rowe**, President and CEO of **The Faxon Company** by **Katina Strauch**

Why not, I said, to myself. And then I asked Dr. Rowe who graciously agreed to answer all kinds of outrageous questions before he headed off to see his daughter Susannah graduate from Johns Hopkins.

ATG: First of all, tell us about yourself. Where were you born? What was your family, and childhood like? People would like to know you as a person, not just as the President of Faxon.

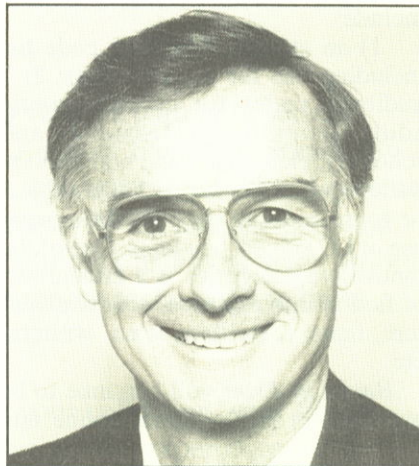
RRR: I was born in Burlington, Iowa. My mother was a school teacher, church organist and writer but, most important, she was a cheerful, dedicated mother for her family of five children. Dad came to this country as a young boy from Cornwall, England in 1910. He became a Methodist minister and met my mother playing croquet on the Iconium church lawn in southeastern Iowa. As I grew up, our family moved from Iowa to Salt Lake City and then on to southern California. I spent lots of summers on my grandparent Gilliland's farm, feeding the pigs, milking the cows, and getting in the hay.

I went to Chula Vista High School, then UC Berkeley and graduated from UCLA in 1955. I had planned to become a doctor but, in 1953, a summer working with East German refugees in Germany changed all of that. I was overwhelmed by what I saw of the destruction of the cities and the lives of the people who survived World War II. I knew that I needed to find a way to help prevent that kind of inhumanity in the future. I studied theology at Boston University, getting a degree in psychology of religion in 1958. That year I spent my first of two summers in the Soviet Union, learning Russian and beginning to appreciate the complexities of Russian life and politics. Then I went on to Yale and finally Columbia University where I received my Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in 1963.

From 1963 to 1967 I worked as Director of the Test Development and

Research Office of the West African Examinations Council, based in Lagos, Nigeria. My task was to help newly independent West African nations take charge of their educational systems by helping them learn the skills needed to manage large-scale national school examinations that were appropriate for their culture and predictive of future academic and professional success.

From Africa I went to the Harvard Graduate School of Education where I was Associate Dean for Administration and later became Director of Harvard's interfaculty doctoral program in Clinical Psychology and Public Practice. The program's mission was



to learn how to apply our understanding of psychodynamics to societal problems, training public, rather than private, practitioners. The graduates of that program are today active in a wide range of public practices.

In 1974 a few of my former students and I created the Cambridge office of the American Institutes for Research (AIR). Our focus was on policy research and programs concerning families and children. Among many things, we created an award-winning television series, "Feeling Free", hosted by four handicapped children, dealing with the way people cope with their limitations. We studied the characteristics of effective child care programs and we examined the personal and social dynamics of adolescent parents. We analyzed the

characteristics of successful volunteer organizations. Judy Davis and I met that same year and, two years later, in 1976 we were married by my father in San Diego.

ATG: Why did you come to Faxon? What led you to leave the academic world?

RRR: In 1979 my father-in-law, Albert Davis, Jr. asked me to consider coming to Faxon. He was ready to retire and none of his children had any interest in the business. It was a big step for me to leave the academic world. I was not sure it would be right for me. As it turned out, I have loved it. The following year I became president of Faxon and in 1981 Judy and I bought the company from her parents. I have now been at Faxon nearly 14 years.

ATG: You have done a lot of different things in your life. After fourteen years at Faxon, do you still enjoy your work? Is it time to move on?

RRR: I've always enjoyed my work immensely. Africa, Harvard, AIR, Faxon — each of these has been challenging, exciting and fun. There's always a challenge to overcome, a problem to convert into an opportunity. Getting feedback from our clients that we are doing good work and are appreciated is very satisfying. I really love my work at Faxon. I was approached by the Clinton headhunters about going to Washington but I decided it wasn't right for me at this point. There's lots more I want to do here.

ATG: What about your family? Do you have any children?

RRR: Yes, I have five wonderful children.

ATG: Tell us about them.

RRR: My oldest child, Kathy, is an Assistant Professor of English at Yale and last year delivered my first

grandchild, Daniel Jacobson, who is a source of unspeakable joy to me. Her husband, Bruce, just received his MBA from MIT. Susannah graduated this June from Johns Hopkins Medical School, with an MD and Masters of Public Health. She will be a resident in ophthalmology at Mass Eye and Ear in Boston. It will be great to have her nearby. Timothy, a graduate of Amherst, has worked for the past two years as a techno-economist for Mitsubishi Research Institute in Tokyo. His focus has been on the impact upon the economy and society of new communications technologies. He is now studying at the Foreign Language Institute in Beijing, where his maternal grandmother taught in the early 1920's, and will continue his MBA studies this fall at MIT.

Judy and I have two sons. Chris is 17 and a student at Proctor Academy in New Hampshire. He is working this summer for a computer store in Boston. Jonathan at 14 is lead guitarist in his rock band, loves snowboarding and is entering Belmont High School this fall.

ATG: Does Faxon and your family occupy all of your time or are you involved in other things as well?

RRR: In addition to Faxon, I continue to work in the field of education. As a member of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, I chair the educational reform task force which is overseeing the process of implementing a major reform of the structure, curriculum and financing of elementary and secondary education in the state. I also serve on several other education-related boards.

ATG: What do you do for fun?

RRR: First of all, I really enjoy my work and being with my kids and their friends is a lot of fun. I enjoy jogging in the morning; I do some of my most productive thinking then. I play racket ball a bit. I try to go sailing somewhere once a year and nearly every summer we go camping or canoeing in Canada or out West. I don't watch much TV these days but enjoy reading a good book.

ATG: What books have you read recently that you would recommend to your library friends?

RRR: There are two that I have found excellent. Edmund Wilson's *The Diversity of Life* is a wonderfully interesting and provocative book. Peter Lyman recommended it to me. It's fun to read and full of really interesting ideas about the importance of diversity in life. The second, I am just getting into Jane Jacob's *Systems of Survival*. It is written in the form of a dialog concerning the moral foundations of business and politics. It's a fascinating discussion of some of the central issues of capitalism and socialism — individual and community. And, for pure entertainment, I loved John Casey's *Spartina*, a novel about a Rhode Island fisherman.

ATG: You are the guru of many of us librarians. If there was one thing that you could change about libraries what would it be?

RRR: The only way to change libraries is for librarians themselves to revisit and revise their own sense of

"The task of the librarian in the future is to be an 'information therapist'."

mission. That is the most critical change needed today in our field.

I like to tell the story about the ice business in Massachusetts. It was an extraordinarily successful industry. Ice companies were able to saw ice out of New England ponds during the winter for very little cost. They paid nothing for the ice itself. Their job was to collect it, package it, distribute it and collect lots of money. They marketed their ice, literally all over the world. Their profits were enormous.

The ice companies had only one problem: they thought they were in the ice business. They were very clever about ways to package and sell ice but as new technologies arrived, they failed to adapt and today no longer exist.

ATG: So, how do we make sure that libraries do not go the way of the ice companies?

RRR: It is critical that we be clear about what our business is. In the past, librarians have tended to think of their task as providing access to information. They have been "collectors" of

information. Their task has been to have as much information as possible available "just in case" someone might need it at some point in time.

Today, new technologies are making the collection and distribution of information more and more of a commodity. Today's challenge for librarians is not how to provide access to more information, but rather how to help our clients manage more effectively the world of knowledge that every day threatens to overwhelm them.

Ask any group of your faculty, students, researchers, business executives how much of what they believe they **should** read that they actually read. Virtually nobody reads as much as half of what they feel they should read. A full 20% of us report that we read **less than 10%** of what we feel we should.

Thus the task of the librarian in the future is to help relieve the sense of being overwhelmed by information that most of our clients experience daily. The task of the librarian in the future is to be an "information therapist", helping our clients become more skilled at coping with the overwhelming amount of information that is accessible to them and helping them to feel more adequate as professionals and as human beings as they struggle with their worlds of knowledge. You might think of it as "guilt reduction."

Given this framework, one can readily see that providing our clients with more and more information is actually doing them a serious disservice. They already have much more than they can cope with. They already carry home each day a pile of paper they promise they will read, only to bring it back the next day — unread. You are smiling, because you know it is so true.

ATG: You are right about the piles of unread papers. But, how can librarians address this problem of information overload?

RRR: The most important task for librarians is to help their clients manage their client's world of knowledge — to help them filter the avalanche of data that flows over us each day. Those filters must be highly individualized, meeting the current needs of their user. Such filters will involve highly sophisticated software and wearable

wireless personal libraries, many early versions of which are currently under production.

Libraries will become distributed into the hands of knowledge workers. Librarians will themselves have much more differentiation in their roles.

Some librarians will be "information therapists" functioning as personal consultants to faculty, students, researchers, helping them create their own personal library "systems" that work well for them.

Some librarians will become network specialists — managing the pathways to and from the literally millions of sources of knowledge — written, visual, oral, interactive — which are populating our globe.

Some librarians will manage specialized centers that become nearly unique resource centers concerning a specific field of knowledge for the entire globe. These centers will include archives of that specialized area of knowledge as well as current awareness services concerning the intellectual communities which are working in that field. They will be an important communications node in the evolution of that field of knowledge.

The thoroughgoing redundancy among institutional collections which we now maintain has become unsustainable. There will remain lots of overlap between institutions in their collections and some thoughtful redundancies. But we can no longer justify maintaining in our own institutional custody the amount of redundancy which we have heretofore claimed is necessary. Those changes will require not only changes in the minds of librarians but in the minds of faculty, researchers and administrators.

Some librarians will become publishers. New modes of "publishing" will continue to emerge, largely because of new technologies. Although the "article" and the "journal", as a series of articles linked together by a common theme or perspective, will continue far into the future, there will be new forms of publishing and new ways for qualifying and distributing quality articles in quality titles.

ATG: Are you saying that librarians will be able to compete successfully with the big publishers who dominate academic publishing today?

RRR: You may be surprised. Again, its going to be a matter of being clear about what business one is in, what value you are offering to your clients. The winners of the new publishing age will be those who understand that the publisher's primary mission is to promote access to highly filtered knowledge in a way that satisfies the needs of knowledge workers. To the extent that publishers in the future view their task as one of controlling, rather than facilitating, access to their "intellectual property," they will have a difficult future.

ATG: What do you think is the most important trend in libraries right now? What will be the most important trend over the next decade?

RRR: Librarians are beginning to realize they can no longer maintain the kinds of comprehensive collections they have had in the past. There is simply too much production of information going on today — and the cost is prohibitive. Not only is it too costly

"The concept of 'information' is increasingly a dysfunctional concept."

to buy as much as we want to, it is too costly to maintain it in good and accessible condition. The cost of cataloging and storing information over time costs more than the original purchase price in many cases.

The most important trend today is the rethinking that librarians are being forced to undergo concerning their mission and roles in the information society. Because of budget limitations, the old model of collecting and cataloging as much as the budget will permit is no longer a workable strategy. Because of new digital technologies, new possibilities for librarians and libraries are emerging. While some librarians are strongly resisting fundamental changes, many are creatively exploring new ways to respond to the emerging needs of knowledge workers.

Over the next decade the most important trend will be the development of interdependence among libraries which will enable libraries to achieve excellence in a few areas and rely upon other libraries for access to excellent collections in other areas. Every li-

brary will provide a "common core" of materials to their users — many of whom will maintain that "core" in their own personal digital libraries. But beyond the core, libraries will learn how to cooperate and share access. This will raise major public policy issues concerning "fair use" and "intellectual property" and the role of tax-paying and tax-consuming organizations in the dissemination of information of various types.

ATG: Will librarians be able to make that shift in their roles or will they hold on to their traditional roles and, if so, what will happen to the traditional library and the traditional librarian?

RRR: There will be "traditional libraries" and "traditional librarians" for decades to come. But the significant growth and change in the information industry will occur in the digital world which will support radically decentralized "personal digital libraries". More and more, knowledge workers will maintain their own personalized, networked library for their work and play. Institutional libraries will increasingly provide technical and logistic support for these personal digital databases which will be the working libraries of the future.

ATG: You talk about "the information industry". What do you include in that phrase?

RRR: I probably shouldn't have used the term. At Faxon I have been suggesting we ban the term "information." The concept of "information" is increasingly a dysfunctional concept. It is used to mean so many different kinds of phenomena that we often confuse each other by its use. Edmund Wilson, in *The Diversity of Life*, points out that taxonomic classification is a requirement for the survival of every species. Eskimos have dozens of words for our concept of "snow". That's because without such differentiation their very existence would be in jeopardy.

We, in the so-called information field, have utterly failed in developing a meaningful taxonomy for our field. One of the urgent tasks of our profession is to develop a more differentiated language that we can use to communicate about our field. Without such

conceptual tools we will remain more confused than we need to be and unnecessarily limit our effectiveness in society.

So, by "information industry" I mean a wide range of enterprises that have in common the fact that they deal, in some way, with "information". It's hard to say what is not included in the phrase and, as such, it is not a very useful concept.

ATG: What do you think that libraries will be like for our children — and for our grandchildren?

RRR: That's a difficult question. As you know, the only certain thing about predictions is that they will be wrong. Nevertheless I would venture to say that libraries will become significantly more differentiated than they are today. There will be more specialization of libraries. I'm not sure how the public library system will evolve. We are unclear about the "rights to know" in our society. We have pretty well established the right to learn, especially for young citizens. But we are not at all clear what citizens in our society have a right to know.

From the point of view of technology, libraries will become very personal matters as digital and communications technologies make it increasingly possible for many of us — those who are not living in poverty — to have personal libraries that are much more accessible and helpful than our current library services. People will be less inclined to come to a building for a book or a magazine. That they will receive when and where they need it. Libraries will increasingly serve as meeting places and community centers of learning. But no longer as warehouses of information. Libraries, as warehouses, will become too expensive to maintain and not nearly as convenient as the personalized home- and work-based alternatives.

In the next century knowledge will become more important to all of us. The knowledge "have's" and "have-not's" will experience very different qualities of life. Issues of equity and fairness will become major political issues. Ultimately we will continue to struggle with the tensions that are inherent between the dual goals of individual achievement and community well-being.

Our biggest danger as a society is that we will continue to over-emphasize the value of individual competitive achievement and undervalue the importance of cooperation and community. Historically we have always valued the "lone ranger" more than the community leader. That has to change if we are to survive.

ATG: We have heard so much about Faxon and the changes that are taking place there. What exactly is going on? Is Faxon split into a Faxon Europe company and a Faxon U.S. company? How about Faxon Canada and Faxon Japan and Faxon Latin America? Can you tell us how Faxon is now organized and the organizational structure of the company? Anything you can tell us would be greatly appreciated.

RRR: I'm always a bit surprised at how much interest there is in what's going on internally at Faxon.

ATG: That shouldn't surprise you.

"Historically we have always valued the 'lone ranger' more than the community leader. That has to change if we are to survive."

You are one of the largest subscription agencies in the world and highly visible both to libraries and publishers — and you seem to keep changing. People want to know what these changes mean for them.

RRR: You are right. We are constantly evolving, working on better ways to serve our clients and trying to shape the future, rather than simply react to it. So, let's talk about the changes at Faxon.

As you know, for many years Faxon has been organized in the U.S. by the different types of clients that we serve. We have Academic, Medical, Business, and divisions. And our Turner agency in New York focused on schools and public libraries. There is a growing demand for customization of our services to the particular needs of different clients. This structure helps us respond differentially to these clients. Although we recently consolidated our US sales team with Jim Smith in the lead, our structure for client services, and our

commitment to that structure, has not changed.

What has changed is that we have separated Faxon's corporate office and functions from those in the U.S. and Latin America. We have created a group called Faxon U.S. and Latin America that is headed by Peter Pyclik who has up to now been serving as the Chief Operating Officer of Faxon as a whole. Peter is now focusing all of his energy on the U.S. and Latin America. That's a big part of our business and our highest priority for the introduction of new and improved services.

We now have a small corporate office, which includes me, a corporate finance group and Joel Baron, who is our vice president responsible for publisher relations. The corporate office oversees five different enterprise groups: the U.S. and Latin America, Europe Mideast and Africa, Asia Pacific, Canada, and Faxon Research Services, Inc. Each of these companies has a great deal of independence but at the same time is linked to all the other Faxon companies by a common vision and mission and by cooperative resource and idea sharing. They are able to focus on their specific clients and respond quickly. The first three of these groups each have several different companies within them. Europe, for example, has five companies in the group. Asia has about the same number. Each group works as a cooperative unit, sharing strategies and resources.

ATG: What about Canada? Why isn't it in the U.S. and Latin America group?

RRR: We kept Canada out of the rest of the Americas group because it is a large, well-managed enterprise which enjoys its own national identity and independence. Our Canadian clients wanted it that way and it makes sense for now.

ATG: Tell us how the Faxon Research Services is doing? That represents a significant departure from Faxon's traditional library subscription services. Will it be successful?

RRR: Faxon Research Service is a new company that we began a couple of years ago. Under Tom Michalak's energetic and brilliant leadership that company has developed a series of ex-

citing, high quality services for knowledge workers. FRS's Faxon Finder, table of contents index, and Faxon Xpress, document delivery service, are important developments for libraries and knowledge workers alike. A large number of innovative services are currently under development that will be announced later this year.

I expect Faxon Research Service to have a profound effect on the process of scholarly communications in the years to come. Tom, and his highly professional team of colleagues, are creating the future for libraries. FRS will be enormously successful.

ATG: Faxon is privately owned?

RRR: Yes. Judy and I are the sole stockholders.

ATG: What can you tell us about Faxon's financial condition?

RRR: As you know, being privately held, we do not release our financial statements to the general public. What I can say is that Faxon has grown significantly over the past decade. We are now nearly seven times larger than we were when I came to Faxon fourteen years ago. We have virtually no long-term debt and good relations with our banks. Our business strategy is focused on long-term growth and positioning Faxon to be an industry leader well into the next century. We have not sought short-term profits but have reinvested our operating profits heavily in improvements in our core business services, increasing our share of the worldwide market for library subscription services and developing a new generation of services in the area of knowledge management. It's a lot to accomplish and, so far, we have done all of this with our own earnings.

ATG: What about Faxon's longer term future? Will libraries need serials vendors in the next century?

RRR: Probably not. In some parts of the world there will be a need for serials vendors for some time. In the U.S. that need will rapidly decline over the next decade or two as communications technologies reduce the need for the kind of intermediary services that serials vendors have provided over the

past century. There will still be a need for a title file but much of that process will be automated and, certainly, the mechanics of invoicing and transfers of money will be accomplished through electronic data interchange networks. There will not be a need in the next century for Faxon to do most of what it now does.

ATG: What will you do then? Retire?

RRR: Absolutely not! As I said earlier, what is critical is that we know what business we are in. Faxon's business is to help our clients manage their worlds of knowledge. Knowledge management will be an enormous growth industry in the next century. It will be as different an industry as ice cutting is from the manufacturing of refrigerators. But the need for knowledge management systems and services

"Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian, wrote that nothing of lasting value can be accomplished in a lifetime."

will be enormous. Faxon will be at the center of that industry.

ATG: I'm not sure I understand what you mean by "knowledge management". Can you explain what you mean by that phrase?

RRR: The definition is evolving as the industry does. It has to do with helping knowledge workers sort out their wheat from their chaff. A kind of intellectual combine, to use a farmer's metaphor. It will certainly involve sophisticated technology, just as the combine was radically more sophisticated than the scythe. The result will be a greater sense of adequacy on the part of the knowledge worker and a higher "yield" rate. We are still working on how to translate these concepts into systems and services.

ATG: What about the future of publishing? Will libraries need publishers in the next century?

RRR: That's an interesting question. Let's first ask, what is publishing? Publishing, for me, involves four crucial elements: the solicitation, selection,

refinement and promotion of ideas. Those four related functions will become immeasurably more important in the next century. In that sense, publishing has a great future. The ways it will be done and the organizations that do it will be very different from today. But those core functions will be the "priestly functions" of the information society.

Some people have said that with new digital technologies there will no longer be a need for the journal. They could not be more wrong, in my opinion. With the mountains of published materials that will tumble through our communications networks there will have to be ways to sort out the wheat from the chaff. And, of course, what is chaff to one person may be wheat to another. Articles will continue to be grouped into "titles" which have the endorsement of a respected editor as being worthwhile. That endorsement and the reputation of the publisher will increasingly be a key filter for readers as they attempt to cope with information overload.

Publications will change their character. There will be more databases that are kept current daily, as with the Human Genome Project. Sound and video will be attached to text and graphics. Journal articles may be "released" to subscribers the moment they are accepted for publication. An "issue" may be made up of those articles which were released during a given month. Subscribers will continue to buy, in advance, the annual set of articles released by a given editor under a serials title. The actual distribution process will be a network commodity and much of the printing will be done by the user.

ATG: Will humanity need libraries in the next century?

RRR: Yes, indeed, humanity will need libraries in the next century. But, library services will become much more differentiated as the nature and role of information itself becomes more differentiated. Again, this is where a powerful taxonomy will be extremely helpful in engineering the future functions and structures of libraries.

As I said before, there will be many different kinds of librarians, serving quite different functions in the coming "century of the mind."

Some librarians will guarantee the "right to know" of all citizens for certain core areas of personal and community life that will be defined by the political process as areas where every citizen has a right to be informed. This will include, among other things, information about health services, employment and housing opportunities, educational opportunities, cultural events, weather forecasts and traffic jams.

Some librarians will create community centers for the continuous process of structured learning in which humans of all ages, not just the young, will increasingly engage. Librarians and educators must create more effective alliances with each other in this area.

Some librarians will maintain global centers of excellence in a specialized area of knowledge. They will maintain the world's archives of knowledge and will distribute that knowledge throughout the world when and where it is needed.

Some librarians will be "knowledge therapists" for faculty, students, researchers, needing help in customizing

their own personal digital libraries so that they more adequately meet their unique and changing needs for information and interactive communication.

ATG: So, you are pretty optimistic about the future for librarians.

RRR: Yes, for those who are willing to change and find the opportunities for service which the future presents. No, for those who try to dig in and hold back the future. There will be many challenging and important roles for librarians in the next century. Those who are ready for those challenges will find the next century the best yet.

ATG: One last question. You've done a lot of different things over the years and have a wide range of interests. Of all of these things, what has been the most important to you?

RRR: My kids, their families and friends, make up the most important part of my life. Nothing else compares in importance. We've always gotten along amazingly well. We enjoy being

together and are close and supportive of each other. They are the source of great pride and joy for me.

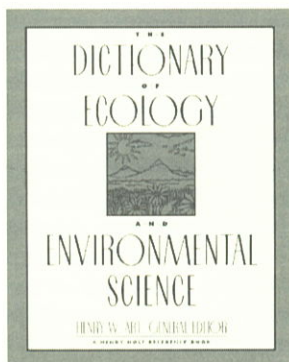
At the same time, I have always been, and remain, a missionary of sorts. I want to leave this world a bit better than I found it. I want to promote understanding and caring within and between communities and societies. I have not always been clear about what I should do. At one time I considered politics and may someday move in that direction, but not now. I keep trying to find ways to make a contribution.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian, wrote that nothing of lasting value can be accomplished in a lifetime. We must be content with being a small part of a larger mission. Faxon has provided me with a forum that has been very satisfying in that regard.

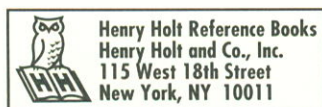
Those two things, my family and helping create a better world, that is what's important to me.

ATG: Thank you for sharing these thoughts with us. ☺

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